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# The Workshop

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### ECCELESIASTICAL ART.\*

BY

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If, in this last division of our present article, we glance, with critical eye, upon what the Catholic Church requires in ornamented tissues and embroideries, it must be understood that we have no intention of reflecting on the changes which have taken place in its liturgical ordinances. The Church has been pleased to fix by certain rules the dress of her clergy on her festivals and high celebrations, or rather by degrees in the course of time to have sanctioned once for all its gradually improved forms. She attributes to these forms, the vestments and their colours, a distinct symbolical or mystic signification which at first they assuredly did not possess, but which now is inseparably connected with them. As far as these ordinances extend, as far as the liturgical vestments are settled by rule and symbolism, art criticism has no place. It is possible that we might think that the clergy might be differently vested, and with a greater show of dignity than is now the case; we might particularly be of opinion that they are too much and too diversely dressed, but while the separate pieces of their dress, their number, shape, colour and ornament are prescribed by rule, they are beyond the pale of criticism.

But outside of these rules, æsthetics have still a wide field for criticism, especially as regards the decorative question. Even the shape is not so entirely prescribed that it might not be subjected to alteration with great advantage. Besides, the present Eucharistic vestments of the clergy have departed in a great degree from those prescribed, or have been disregarded, either through the change of taste, or by the impossibility of

providing everything according to rule through the poverty of the Church, or too great distance from the manufacturing towns. As now, as we have already noticed in our introductory remarks, the ornaments of the eucharistic vestments have become at once secular and of dilettante fashion, they have not been overlooked by the new efforts at reform in ecclesiastical art, which indeed may be said to have taken their point of departure from them. Here too, they go back to the middle ages, and derive from them their models of improvement, and generally with good reason; this, however alas, is not always because of their beauty and dignity, but not unfrequently because they afford scope to archæological fancies and artistic symbolism.

The shape of the vestments, their plastic appearance as well as their ornamentation, are all kept in view by these efforts at reform. With regard to the first point, in which, by reason of the liturgical prescriptions, there can be no thorough change, we have but few remarks to make. The more remote the period, the more elegant perhaps were the ecclesiastical vestments in this respect. Derived for the most part from classical antiquity and therefore scarcely at all of ecclesiastical origin, they brought with them a plastic element, namely a certain fulness and breadth of fold through the softness of the material. Large folds of a wide vestment made of a soft but at the same time solid tissue, always give the wearer a dignified mien, which should be the primary requisite for the clergy. This element of a noble, calm, and even imposing beauty has by degrees been lost to the eucharistic vestments, partly by the change of the material and its ornaments, and partly by the alteration of the shape. The material became stiffer and unadapted

\* Concluded from page 51 anterior.

to folds, both because of its being stitched with a quantity of gold and stiff silver gilt thread, and because it was covered with embroidery which was stiffly underlaid and gradually wrought in higher and higher relief. As to the form, the Priest in his pontifical robes found himself particularly obstructed by the proper eucharistic vestment, the Chasuble, which, originally a circular mantle with a hole for the head, hung down over the body and covered the arms. In order to liberate the arms, the chasuble was first drawn up by the sides to the shoulders, and afterwards a piece was cut out right and left from the bottom to the top, so that only two coverings for breast and back remained, joined together at the upper part. These being themselves of a stiff material had also to bear the stiff embroidery, so that they resembled two straight shields or boards covering the front and back of the body. It was the same with the other ornaments; some were obliged to be cut and carved, others to have a stiffened lining. Hence it may easily be perceived what must be the first step towards reform. All this stiffness must be done away with; the softness and flow of the linen vestment together with its folds must be restored without impeding the function of the priest. For this models may easily be found in the ornaments of mediæval times, ornaments which do not lie beyond the liturgical prescription. All that is necessary is the recognition of what is really good in itself, the separation of the essential from the non-essential, the abandonment of all that does not harmonise with our present taste.

This last observation applies still more to the coloured decorations. Reform is even more to be desired in this respect than in the form. It has been already pointed out in what manner the ornamentation of the vestments has degenerated in the last two centuries. All real nobleness of ornament has been lost. They are covered with naturalistic flowers, with unnatural, senseless unsightly ornaments of the Rococo period, interwoven largely with stiff gold threads; and their glittering appearance still heightened by the addition of plates of polished gold; silver is frequently intermixed with the gold with very bad effect, indeed the whole effect is rude, in bad taste and glaring, and seems only intended for the vulgar, while every detail is for the most part executed with the insufficient technic of dilettantism.

Now there are assuredly numberless specimens of mediæval times, many of which are still in excellent preservation, in which all this is different. If we desire to see how, both in embroidery and figures, gold can be used in a chaste, appropriate, and at the same time most effective manner, we ought to study, for example, the so-called Burgundian Eucharistic vestments in the Vienna Treasury, which were made by order of Philip, duke of Burgundy, about the middle of the fifteenth century, for the inauguration of the order of the Golden Fleece. In these, the gold is introduced in a charming and really artistic proportion to the colours, the gold threads sometimes are closely grouped, forming bold design, still modest and appropriate to the surface decoration,

sometimes are distributed among the colours of the drapery, sparkling brilliantly in their midst. From the same vestments also it may be learnt how in colour and shape, the head and hand can be executed in embroidery with the exactness of a picture, so as not to appear like caricatures, as is now the rule. If we wish to know how tapestry should be embroidered with gold so as to produce a more or less rich, a more or less splendid, but always a dignified effect corresponding to its high destination, the middle ages, especially the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries provide us with an abundance of the most excellent models. If we want simple and chaste designs for ornaments which are, or should be indispensable for Church furniture; if we look for that happy and proportionate disposition of ornament and plain surface, on which so frequently all good effect depends; if we want an abundance of ornamental motives which an artistic fancy enriches itself with, and delights in, all this may be acquired from the numerous specimens of tapestry which the middle ages produced, and fragments of which at least it has bequeathed to us.

But there is much more than this to be found in mediæval tapestries. We discover in them, and the more so, the deeper we dive back into antiquity, a quantity of natural or fantastical forms of animals frequently arranged in stiff repetition. Lions and elephants, peacocks and eagles, unicorns and griffins, [beasts with human heads, and men with the bodies of beasts. Among them are objects taken from legends and christian symbolism or there is depicted upon them the whole range of those typical pictures to which the Church, in their grouping and respective connexion, attributed a significance which at present is incomprehensible either to laity or clergy or which can only be determined by the initiated. Whole systems of theology, so to speak, the entire kingdom of heaven, the Lord with the angelic host and his faithful ones, are all represented and artistically arranged in embroidery on the mantles of the priests, as if their vestments were a canvas on which anything might be drawn and painted at pleasure, and the priest a travelling illustrated Bible for the study and edification of the laity. Nor are these isolated examples; on the contrary they are numerous enough and belong to the most significant phenomena of mediæval art, so that a reform of ecclesiastical drapery cannot pass over them without notice or without pronouncing upon them.

How then should reform commence with regard to these circumstances? The present efforts towards an improvement of ecclesiastical vestments are not disinclined to apply the reform to other peculiarities of the mediæval tissues and vestments. But is there any necessity for this? Is not rather the stand-point of reform entirely wrong in paying more regard to the historical associations of an object than to its beauty.

As to the animal forms and other peculiar ornaments, they cannot have the slightest pretension to any ecclesiastical character. The whole genre has its original root in Asia, and that in remote antiquity, or has been brought at a later period into the Western world by

Mahometan industry. The mediæval Church unquestionably made use of Arabian stuffs for all its requirements, no matter what sort of ornament, what kind of object, even should it be a verse of the koran, was depicted upon them. Christian industry has followed the example, and entirely lost sight of their origin. By degrees indeed a symbolic significance has been attributed to several animal forms possibly of biblical origin, but no regard was paid either to their origin or significance, the only thing looked to being the costliness of the material, not what was represented upon it.

The case is different, it is true, with purely Christian objects, and the representations derived from the Bible or the realm of typical pictures. These are unquestionably both ecclesiastical and christian. But their use is only a superfluity, not a necessity or ordinance. If there are religious grounds for them, æsthetic grounds are against them. They miss their aim, inasmuch as they draw off the attention from the appearance of the priest to the objects with which his vestments are decorated. They afford matter for observation and thought, which may be the proper province of a book or picture, but not of a dress. Moreover the place where they are seen is quite unadapted to the development of such pictorial representations. Both the curvature of the body and the folds of the material hinder either a perfect effect or a satisfactory observation. The pictures appear piecemeal, bent and broken up. Even the cleverest arrangement, which is frequently calculated upon, cannot correct this, while, if the figures are kept in their old stiffness and awkwardness the evil is even increased. But of this we have already spoken in the first part of this article.

What then is to be done? As there is no authority to compel a distinct arrangement or representation, it would be well never to lose sight of the ornamental standpoint. The thing required is that the priest should be drest so as to present a dignified, imposing, and at the same time a stately appearance worthy of the functions which he has to fulfil. The protestant Church rejects this in her exterior strictness, but with Catholicism it is a tradition and a requisite. We by no means wish to throw away the representation of figures, but they should be of well known and intelligible objects, and not

exhibited on an artistic and complicated system, which can neither be understood nor overlooked: they should be sparingly used and only applied where they can neither disturb nor be disturbed, and if simply, still as perfectly designed and executed as possible. Animal figures should only be permitted when symbols of Christian ideas, but even then only moderately added to the ornament, or forming the ornament themselves. Their significance is then not much greater than that of the foliage or other conventionalised ornament, of which the middle ages made use in their tapestries. It is to these velvets and silks with their conventional ornaments that we would chiefly call attention: there are the materials which should, preferably to any other, take the place of those hitherto in use in the Church; no matter whether they are gothic, romanesque or byzantine. They are to be found with each of these styles, and undergo some change with the lapse of time, but being mostly of oriental origin, are little affected by it and take their own path. Their value consists in this, that in principle they are good models, that they produce a good effect, that their designs are noble, that they preserve a due proportion between the groundwork and the pattern, and offer an abundance of ornamental motives. Their value therefore is of permanent duration, and their application not limited to any definite style or period.

It is this direction especially that the present efforts for the reform of ecclesiastical art are taking. What we have taken upon ourselves to blame is indeed zealously defended, but often merely in theory, or in the case of specimens produced at great expense of artistic and scientific skill, but which have not been the subject of much imitation. Still they are dangerous precedents enough, and extend to other provinces of ecclesiastical art than those which we are able to notice within the limits of a periodical journal. It may not therefore be a superfluous task, to have once for all set ourselves against them, and endeavoured to circumscribe the limits within which these efforts at reform are praiseworthy and beyond which they are the reverse. The usefulness of these efforts within these limits is unquestionable, and the scope of them wide enough to permit the rejection of all crudities, excrescences and exaggerations.